

### Critical dialogue Artistic freedom in Cuba

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Artistic freedom, political tasks  
by Michael Scrivener

I admire and agree with your criticism of Cuba's repressive policies against gays ("Homosexuality in Cuba," JUMP CUT 19), but I was disturbed by your views on artistic freedom. I will quote the passage in full that troubled me so much.

"The open homosexuality of a number of members of Padilla's circle was not the only issue and certainly not the principal reason for his arrest in March 1971. Padilla was aligned with a group of artists and intellectuals in Havana whose pro-individualism and taste for Western formalism landed them on the wrong side of Cuba's commitment to an egalitarian, revolutionary people's culture. *Certainly this official Cuban position on the role of the revolutionary intellectual is one we are in political agreement with.* The Cultural and Educational Congress detailed the *legitimate demands communism can make on intellectuals.* In fact, *we can only admire here Cuba's fight against the remnants of cultural imperialism,* its call for all educated people to place their abilities and resources in the service of building a new society, and its reshaping of cultural and educational organs to meet the needs of the masses" (p. 38, italics added).

You are saying that it was wrong to imprison Padilla for homosexuality, but perfectly acceptable to punish him for pro-individualism and liking Western formalism. It is one thing to disagree with an artist's philosophy; it is quite another to put him in jail for it. Are you not

justifying an incredibly repressive logic here? Did Padilla kill anyone? Steal anything? Divulge military secrets? Form a terrorist group? No. He hung around the wrong sort of people and liked the wrong sort of art. Perhaps the editors have heard of someone called Joe Stalin, who put to death quite a few people he didn't like — all of them "counter-revolutionaries," from Stalin's perspective. Although Castro has not even approached the dictatorial excesses achieved by comrade Joe, I think it is inexcusable not to call repression by its name: repression. There is nothing revolutionary about it.

You also say that "communism" can make "legitimate demands" on intellectuals to help build the new society. Is "communism" an idea, a government, or a social movement? Clearly, in context, you mean government, so I have to disagree with you. You are assuming that Castro and whoever else runs things in Cuba have greater wisdom than the intellectuals (as if Castro weren't an intellectual). If intellectuals were not forced to do the "revolutionary" task assigned them, then what would they do? As long as they did not harm anyone, why shouldn't they be allowed to be as pro-individualist and formalist as they like? Is not the government secure enough to allow artistic freedom? Granted, I think everyone should do his or her share of hard work, but if an artist puts in his quota of socially useful labor, why shouldn't s/he be allowed also to create whatever art s/he desires — and also be allowed to seek whatever audience s/he can?

There are two issues here, one political, one moral. The political issue is artistic freedom, and I fail to see anything revolutionary about repressing artists. The second issue is moral. *Should* an artist devote his/her art to the social revolution? The answer to this question is much more problematic than the editors seem to think. First, in Cuba, can one equate the Cuban government, the social revolution, and the Cuban people? No, of course not. Throughout your article you distinguished between a Cuban public (meaning government) and popular opinion (meaning most Cubans). I myself do not find the Cuban government very radical, nor do I think there is any social revolution going on in Cuba. In addition to the fact that the USSR dominates Cuban politics, especially Cuba's imperialistic presence in Africa, the Cuban working people *do not* control their society; they do not determine what will be produced, how it will be produced, for what reasons, or by whom. Indeed, the movement is now away from workers' self-management, not towards it. Be this as it may, even if Cuba were more to my liking, I think it is a dangerous and unacceptable idea to equate the government with the social revolution, and then harness artists and intellectuals to this state apparatus. The counter to objections like mine is always "petty bourgeois and liberal," but I think that there is nothing at all capitalistic about artistic freedom.

If artists, of their own free will, decide to produce an art which a socialist

government approves of — fine; which a social revolutionary movement likes — fine; which most of the people like — fine. But to make this into a legal imperative is a severe and illegitimate limitation upon the artist. If the art is wrong in some way, a healthy revolutionary society has nothing to fear. If, however, the art is saying things people should hear but which they don't like to experience, then we have a different situation, a very familiar situation. Isn't it possible for revolutions to go wrong? For governments to betray the interests of the revolution? And if these are possibilities, isn't it also a possibility that free artists might be cultural watchdogs to criticize the society when it deserves it? If, however, artists are tied to the government, they will never be able to be critical. Perhaps you think the Cuban government is the last word in revolutionary wisdom. Even if you do, you must grant the possibility of such a government being wrong occasionally, or even of degenerating into authoritarianism. Where will the revolutionary opposition come from if artists and intellectuals and indeed all cultural activity have been tied to the state?

Just what constitutes revolutionary art is a controversial question. My own definition would not coincide with yours, and I am sure if JUMP CUT readers were polled, we would get even more definitions. If this is so, I think it is damaging to the revolutionary project to limit artistic freedom, to put government in control of art.

I don't know what you mean by cultural imperialism, but I do know what you mean by a fight against it. It is curious that Western intellectuals with leftist politics are so uncomfortable with the notion of individualism. Capitalism breeds a phony individualism and a real conformism, but most leftists seem to want an abolition of individualism altogether. Was it not the dream of nineteenth century socialism that a new society would create the conditions in which individualism could really flourish, in a non-exploitative way? What was so horrifying about alienated labor, according to Marx, was that the worker had to submerge his/her own creativity in order to mechanically produce a commodity that would further impoverish him or her, mentally, physically and economically. I have nothing against collective efforts and social cooperation; indeed, society is unthinkable without these. But without freedom for the individual, a revolution is doomed to become authoritarian. Look at the USSR, China, Cambodia, Korea, Eastern Europe.

You want freedom for the artist in bourgeois countries. Why not in Cuba too?

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Response by Chuck Kleinhans and John Hess

Scrivener misreads the JUMP CUT statement. It was not intended to

say, and does not say, and we do not believe that "making legitimate demands" on intellectuals should be enforced by throwing them in jail if they don't provide art with a specifically identifiable socialist content.

We think the reason Scrivener leaps to his false conclusion is because he has an ahistorical and idealist notion of artistic and personal freedom. Artistic freedom and artistic responsibilities are important issues, particularly with reference to socialist countries. The question we tried to address in the statement is, "What is the social and political role of the artist under socialism?" We don't think this question can be answered in the abstract, and we'd like to recommend John merger's book, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the USSR*, as an example of how to think about this issue concretely and historically.

People still write and paint "non-revolutionary" art in socialist countries. But the important consideration here is not just the creative act and its immediate product, as Scrivner seems to think. To focus on only that is characteristic of bourgeois thought. We must also think about the social, political, and economic context of art, including how it is produced and distributed. Scrivener manages totally to ignore these matters. The question for Cuba is one of how to use acutely scarce resources in the cultural sphere. Let's not forget that the country has been under an economic blockade by the US for many years, in addition to facing the problem of reorganizing for the benefit of the masses of Cubans an economic and cultural production that had only served a tiny few before 1959.

Given that priorities have to be established, how should they be set up? Who decides? Is the state, given that it does not have infinite resources for everything, obliged to print and distribute writings from all tendencies? Should formalist art that appeals only to a small fraction of the population be given the same attention and expenditure of funds as art that addresses the majority? Who is an artist and who should be paid a wage for it? Should it be decided by self-proclamation? Recognition by peers? Apprenticeship? By passing a test? By schooling and certification? These are questions that Scrivner doesn't even seem to be aware of.

What about artists who work in fields that demand expensive facilities, equipment, and the assistance of talented people? Filmmakers, choreographers, architects, and composers? What of large scale public art such as murals? Is the state or party or population obliged to go along with someone whose "art" is a performance piece that ties up Havana traffic during rush hour?

We think a revolution can make legitimate demands on intellectuals — just as it makes demands on workers. Sometimes that means artists have to give up privileges they had under capitalism-privileges the petty

bourgeoisie obtains because workers are exploited. Scrivener's idealism doesn't recognize such concrete problems. He doesn't seem to understand what cultural imperialism is. Nor does he recognize that his ignorance of the topic is an example of it. His notion of "freedom" is basically bourgeois and on the same level as Jimmy Carter's hypocritical concern for "human rights" everywhere but in the U.S. and its puppet dictatorships abroad.

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## Response by Julia Lesage

Scrivener's letter raises two basic issues that affect me personally, and which I would like to respond to. First, I constantly question the role of a radical intellectual in a capitalist society — that is, my role. Second, I want to know how a revolutionary society might be different, able to offer different kinds of opportunities to and place different demands on me and my peers.

We all live in history and within a specific economic, legal and social system. Scrivener's view of artistic freedom seems to posit it as some kind of Platonic Ideal. If I try to trace out a specific example of cultural production, one close to JUMP CUT 's concerns, this abstraction of 'freedom does not make sense to me. In the U.S. all filmmaking is done within the context of an interlocking network of certain institutions, and films are either made and distributed within these institutions or are "marginal" because outside them. The institutions I refer to are the film and television production and distribution industries, 16mm distribution circuits (public library, educational film, medical, industrial film, etc.), arts councils and other "philanthropic" funding agencies, and university positions for artists, writers, and filmmakers. Some independent film production can be done outside these institutional networks that provide financial support to filmmakers, but very little such filmmaking is done or seen on a wide scale. In the U.S., artists, especially filmmakers, do not have the freedom to deal with any subject in any way they choose because of very real economic and institutional constraints. We should take this issue of artistic freedom raised by Scrivner and examine it with specific historical contexts.

Several centuries ago, artistic freedom meant freedom from the whims and immediate demands of a patron, who might want a sonata for a birthday party or a miniature painted to send a current lover. When mercantile capitalism had sufficiently eroded feudalism by leveling social relations to those of the market place, at a certain point artists saw that freedom would lie in "public support" from a monied bourgeoisie rather than aristocratic patronage. Under capitalism today, artistic freedom often means fighting for state Support, either direct or indirect. What does it mean in other countries?

Scrivener denies any understanding of the term, "cultural imperialism." In Canada, two distribution monopolies, Odeon and Famous Players, control over 80% of the feature film distribution and deal almost exclusively with the U.S. majors, which themselves are heavily invested in these foreign distribution outlets. Filmmakers in French-speaking Africa must send their films to France to be developed and edited in labs there; at the same time they do not have access to French-controlled theatrical distribution in their own countries.

I myself lived in Lima, Peru, for three years, from 1967 to 1970, a period of relative "artistic freedom." Movies from Europe and the U.S. brought us "culture" from the rest of the world, but there was no national film industry and only a minimal amount of book publication. The artistic impulse was certainly not underdeveloped in Peru. But because of economic limitations and because of the influx of cheap imported subtitled and dubbed films and TV programs, especially from the U.S., national cultural production was underdeveloped. Since that time, with more general political repression in Peru, there is now severe cultural censorship. As the Peruvian government has turned to the right and cooperates fully with the U.S.-controlled International Monetary Fund and Bank for International Development, which underwrite the Peruvian currency and dictate economic policies such as doubling the price of food staples, it is no coincidence that the censorship of writers, filmmakers, and other artists falls most heavily on the left.

There is a real material basis to cultural imperialism, a small part of which was described by Julianne Burton and Humberto Solas in JUMP CUT 19. The economics of artistic production under capitalism determine what art will be *widely* seen, heard, or read in many countries besides our own. Our culture industry markets our films, TV programs, and middle-brow publications such as *Time*, *Psychology Today*, *Rolling Stone*, and *American Film*. We sell our cultural productions as aggressively and as cheaply as we do Coca Cola. In terms of the Cuban revolution, cultural imperialism means that Cuban society did not develop its own indigenous culture, nor its textbook industry, nor its film production before the revolution, that there were huge needs in these areas after the revolution, and that both what ordinary people were used to receiving and what artists and intellectuals were used to producing in Cuba would and should change in the course of massive social planning for a new society.

Scrivener fears most that economic, political, and cultural institutions make direct demands on artists and intellectuals and that this shapes the total artistic and intellectual production of a country. Yet the myth of artistic and intellectual freedom in the United States hides the fact (barely) that our work, my work as well, is shaped by these very institutions. JUMP CUT writers, for example, are frequently young academics who want to write film criticism that satisfies their social and



political integrity, but that also qualifies as a publication in a serious film journal when they come up for job review. JUMP CUT exists within the interstices of such contradictions, which are part of the liberal "pluralism" of the cultural sector of our society.

Yet what are I and other radical artists and intellectuals in the United States and other capitalist countries not allowed to do, what are individuals not allowed to do? We can get involved in community theater, run for office, join or organize a union on our campus, start a parent-controlled cooperative day-care center where we work — but we always know how partial and shot-gun these efforts are. We can have or hope for a home, love, leisure, and the products of our own creativity — but the philosophy or ideology of individualism encourages us to think of these things as abstract Good Things, as our right and sought-for possessions; we are not encouraged to look at the social context that shapes what we can have — or at who gets what as an individual, since most cultural and intellectual opportunities under capitalism, as well as economic ones, go to white middle class men. Capitalist production for profit, not use, ruling class values, and power to enact those values shape all aspects of our lives. An "individual" is free to invest money to make money or to move about from place to place as she or he sells her/his labor power, but one of the things that the worker and petty bourgeois artist and intellectual are not allowed to think of as a right and as part of their identity as a person is the right to shape the school system in which they work, the organization of their work place, their cultural institutions, and their government.

Communist intellectuals and artists in Cuba who devote their work to the revolution are not doing so because of moral suasion, but because they understand their own history and the potential role of intellectuals in that history now that a communist revolution has been won. Participating in planned cultural change and shaping it does not look to them like a loss of personal freedom but an immense gain, that of people moving collectively to take even greater control over the conditions of their lives. When I visited Cuba in summer, 1978, it was clear to me that communism had not yet been achieved in any ideal sense; opportunism has not been erased and immense contradictions still exist. But the Cuban revolution and the whole economic, political, and cultural process of building that revolution does have immense popular support, and it was with the growth of that support and with the clearest manifestation of U.S. imperialism at Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs) that Fidel declared the Cuban revolution a communist one. "Communism" in Cuba means a revolutionary movement as well as a party; it means a political and economic philosophy translated into specific laws and strategies, a government, and a consensus.

Now, JUMP CUT defines itself as a cultural publication not tied to any specific left group or party in the U.S. Speaking for myself, I do not see

that any left organization in the U.S. has yet developed a coherent strategy or enough popular support to be a truly revolutionary force for change. But the Communist Party in Cuba is supported by popular consensus and is selfconsciously the vehicle for social change. When Scrivener distinguishes between three groups in Cuba — the government, working people, and artists and intellectuals — he fails to discuss the Communist Party. Although I cannot idealize that institution, I cannot help but wonder, in thinking about my own situation as a radical intellectual in the U.S., what new imperatives I would face and accept if I too were in a revolutionary party here which had been won by and continued to maintain the U.S. working people's mass support.

Humberto Solas, in his interview in JUMP CUT 19, gives us a glimpse of what artistic freedom means for a filmmaker in Cuba today:

"We accept a certain society; we live within it and belong to it; we defend it and want to enrich it. Because of this, our critical attitude is very different from that of someone who lives and works in an environment which s/he considers hostile and alienating ... Revolutionary freedom involves the freedom to produce revolutionary art, whereas petty bourgeois freedom entails the possibility of presenting an anguished criticism which is often arrogant and seldom productive."

Scrivener postulates artistic freedom ahistorically, but surely such freedom has meant and will continue to mean different things in different historical contexts. The example of Cuban film production raises questions, and to a certain extent provides answers, about the social component of artistic freedom under socialism. As a teacher, a feminist, and a socialist, I am concerned about the social component of my intellectual work, and I encourage students to make social demands on art and on their teachers. To have ones peers, one's political comrades, and one's countrymen and women ask that one serve the people is not a limitation of freedom. It is the start of having one's work integrated with history and the freedom of all people.